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English for Academic Purposes (EAP) in UK higher education: examining the impact of EAP's position within the academy on service delivery, identity and quality

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Sharon Riddle's research focuses on the positioning of English for Academic Purposes in UK higher education.

English for Academic Purposes (EAP) in UK higher education: examining the impact of EAP's position within the academy on service delivery, identity and quality

This paper will outline a forthcoming PhD project exploring the provision of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) services in UK higher education institutions.

Neoliberalism in UK universities has contributed to the extent and importance of EAP, but has also led to many challenges for staff and service delivery, including where EAP is located in HE structures. The study will examine EAP's position, focusing on questions relating to its role, how EAP practitioners operate, the impact of the position of EAP, and improvement strategies. Three EAP units in different structural positions in higher education will be examined and data will be considered in the light of Bourdieu's theories of 'field', 'habitus', 'capital' and 'symbolic violence'. It is hoped that the study will shed light on why EAP services are positioned as they are, how this impacts on quality, and how they can reposition to provide more benefit to the academy.

Keywords: academic literacy; English for Academic Purposes; international student education; higher education

The neoliberalisation of higher education has transformed universities into commercial enterprises which have to grapple with tensions between business imperatives and academic standards (Murray, 2015). Marketization and changes in the financing of higher education have forced all universities to secure alternative funding, leading to increased competition in the international student market (Foskett, 2011). This has led to a rapid rise in high fee-paying international students in the UK, with a total of 458,490 in 2017/18 (HESA, 2019). Success in attracting and retaining international students is key, and involves providing value for money, a positive student experience and ultimate academic success, resulting in enhanced income and prestige for the institution. Academic literacy is a major issue for international students, leading to the increased importance of language support, usually known as English for Academic Purposes (EAP).

The provision of high quality language support plays a key part in the internationalisation agenda and financial health of universities. The marketization of higher education and the resulting rapid rise in international students has increased the demand for EAP, shaped its role and has led to a shift in its position in universities. While it is recognised in the literature that EAP is ‘on the edge’ of academia (Ding & Bruce, 2017), there has been no detailed work on causes, effects and solutions. This article describes a forthcoming study which aims to fill this gap by examining the position of EAP within UK universities, and the impact on identity, quality and service delivery.

There are many definitions of EAP, including EAP being “famously needs-driven, centrally focused on meeting the needs of students seeking to study or undertake research in English-medium university contexts” (Bruce, 2017, p. 1). However, these definitions fail to represent the complexity of current provision (Campion, 2016). The complex landscape of EAP

provision (Blaj-Ward, 2014) includes foundation, pre-sessional and in-session courses, provision of language support for lower level students (Alexander, 2012; Murray, 2015), decentralised services to engage more effectively with academic departments (Murray, 2016) and outsourced services in the private sector.

Neoliberalism has had a significant impact on the role, governance and funding of UK higher education, including how students are viewed and the nature of academic life and identity. The marketization of higher education has transformed universities into commercial enterprises (Foskett, 2011) which compete for student consumers (Murray, 2015), leading to a shift in the position and role of EAP to that of servicing high numbers of fee-paying students, for example on large pre-sessional programmes. Therefore, EAP courses attract substantial income for universities, but they are also often under-resourced and subject to cost-cutting measures (Marginson, 2010). This has resulted in the perception of EAP as an income generator at a sub-degree level with reduced academic standing (Fulcher, 2009). Also, universities are affected by increased privatisation and outsourcing (Ball, 2007), particularly in the provision of academic literacy services, resulting in private EAP providers working with 61 British universities in 2016 (Bell, 2016). In addition, the process of managerialism has resulted in changed roles, an imitation of private sector management practices including an increase in precarious short-term contracts (Deem, Hillyard, & Reed, 2007; Hyland, 2018) and an erosion of the professional autonomy of academics (Olssen & Peters, 2005). New roles have emerged, for example ‘third space’ professionals who span professional and academic domains (Whitchurch, 2013).

The existence and growth of EAP is rooted in the transformation of higher education (Ding, 2016) together with the spread of English (Ferguson, 2007; Phillipson, 2009). However, these

same factors have also influenced the positioning of EAP within universities, resulting in it occupying different spaces within organisational structures, including units which are on the margins (Ding & Bruce, 2017), outsourced (Fulcher, 2009) or decentralised (Murray, 2016; Wingate, 2018). A direct result of neoliberalism has been the development of a ‘third space’ professionals who work across the academic and professional divide (Whitchurch, 2013). In the EAP context, Hadley (2015) studied Blended EAP Professionals (BLEAPs), whose role is a mixture of teaching and management, working in ‘Student Processing Units’ which provide “academic training, remedial learning, and other educational experiences for large numbers of students” (p. 39). Furthermore, Hyland and Hamp-Lyons (2007) note that in these changed institutional contexts, “EAP teachers are frequently employed as vulnerable, short-term instructors in marginalized ‘service units’” (2007, p. 10), and this theme of marginalisation is touched on repeatedly in the literature (Ding & Bruce, 2017; Turner, 2004).

Marginalisation is usually discussed in relation to social exclusion and a sense of not belonging (Mowat, 2015), leading to powerlessness (Hyland, 2018) and oppression (Moran, 2014). In the context of EAP provision in UK higher education, it is manifested in a number of ways. Organisational structures increasingly place EAP services outside of the university, resulting in the proliferation of private providers (Bell, 2016; Fulcher, 2009). The lack of status and influence of EAP practitioners is also affected, where practitioners are vulnerable, professionally isolated or powerless with limited job security and little influence (Ding & Bruce, 2017; Hadley, 2015; Hyland, 2018). Furthermore, EAP can be invisible in the literature related to the internationalisation of universities, for example, De Vita (2007), suggesting that there is no guarantee that EAP will be involved in planning for international students.

Differing perceptions and a lack of understanding of EAP has also weakened its position, leading to EAP practitioners feeling undervalued (Murray, 2016) with a lack of recognition of EAP's wider role in enhancing disciplinary writing and providing academic literacy support. In fact, some believe that EAP is guilty of colluding in its own marginalisation by taking a 'butler's stance' (Raimes, 1991) and accepting a role as an "economic and intellectual shortcut" (Turner, 2004, p. 86). Furthermore, with no common prerequisite qualification for becoming an EAP practitioner (Ding & Campion, 2016), academic colleagues may believe that EAP does not require any specialist skill and can be taught by anyone who can speak English (Murray, 2016).

Mowat (2015) advocates that marginalisation encompasses both the state of being marginalised, and also the resulting emotional response, including feelings about not belonging and frustrations about not being able to work effectively and contribute. Hadley's findings agreed with this, where he found that some EAP units are places of fear, anger, disappointment and "psychological suffering" (Hadley, 2015 p. 359).

In responding to marginalisation, Johns suggests that EAP practitioners should be proactive and not simply "wring hands and bemoan marginality" (1997, p. 154). Practitioners are also urged to take a critical stance by not accepting the status quo, but question the political context of EAP (Benesch, 2001). In the context of the strong structural forces of neoliberalism, Ding and Bruce (2017) recommend adopting a reflexive attitude to develop agency, and that groups, or 'corporate agents', can exercise power using collective action (Archer, 2003), a possible role for BALEAP, EAP's professional body.

The positioning of EAP within the academy has had an effect on the identity of practitioners. A sense of identity is formed through combining internal and external views of an individual or group (Jenkins, 2008), and there is sometimes a contrast between these views, as in the case of EAP. The ‘inside view’ is that EAP is key in supporting students and researchers whose academic success relies on them being able to communicate in English (Hyland, 2018). Benesch (2001) takes this further, suggesting that EAP is transformative, helping students to not only do well, but also encouraging them to question and shape the education they are being offered. Also, EAP is also considered to be an academic discipline and research activity (Ding & Bruce, 2017; Hamp-Lyons, 2011). However, there are also issues regarding the identity of EAP and EAP practitioners, with EAP seen as being on the margins of higher education (Ding & Bruce, 2017; Turner, 2011) and adopting a low-status service role (Hyland & Shaw, 2016). Furthermore, the new BLEAP roles in EAP, described by Hadley (2015) are different to those of traditional EAP teachers, one informant in his study describing himself as “teacher, administrative researcher and politician...salesman too” (p. 46).

Although the ‘outside view’ of EAP provides a contrast to this, it also echoes concerns relating to the marginality of EAP. Many colleagues from the academy appear to consider EAP as being unnecessary (Murray, 2015), of low status (Johns, 1997), a remedial service for language problems (Turner, 2011) and sub-degree (Fulcher, 2009). However, EAP is also seen as being lucrative and commercial, particularly in the case of summer pre-sessional courses which attract increasing numbers of fee-paying international students (Hyland, 2018), leading to increased vulnerability to outsourcing (Fulcher, 2009). Furthermore, it is unclear as to whether academic colleagues share the view that EAP is an academic discipline and scholarly.

The position of EAP impacts on service delivery and quality in a number of ways. As Bruce (2017, p. 1) suggests, EAP is 'needs driven' focusing on the needs of students, researchers and university staff. In order to understand these needs fully, EAP practitioners need to liaise with academic colleagues and become familiar with the specific language conventions and genres of different disciplines. Not having this understanding could lead to many issues, including services which are irrelevant to the real needs of students and staff, curricula of EAP courses which may not match specific disciplinary needs, for example the genres used in assessment, and a lack of support for both home and international students. In addition, a lack of understanding of what EAP can offer may limit the extent to which EAP practitioners are involved in decision-making relating to international students and are able influence the bigger institutional picture (Hyland, 2018). Finally, a misunderstanding of the role of EAP and the potential value to university staff and students may discourage the uptake of services.

The location of EAP may also affect the quality of teaching, due to under-resourcing (Marginson, 2010), tutors with heavy teaching loads (Hadley, 2015) and lack of time or encouragement for scholarship (Ding & Bruce, 2017).

The position of EAP within the academy can be understood through the lens of Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical work on social theory, in particular his concepts of 'field', 'habitus', 'capital' and 'symbolic violence'. Higher education can be analysed as a 'field', or social arena, with its own organisational culture, values, practices and dispositions, or 'habitus'. The hierarchical position of individuals, such as EAP practitioners, within the field of higher education depends on the amount of 'capital' they possess. Bourdieu refers to many forms of capital, including economic capital and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986), but prominent in the

field of higher education are: 'scientific capital' relating to intellectual renown, and 'academic capital' which is related to institutional control (Bourdieu, 1988). Furthermore, power over others is exerted through conscious or unconscious strategies of 'symbolic violence' which soften and disguise domination (Bourdieu, 1992).

An exploration of how EAP practitioners attempt to gain credibility and influence in higher education will be included in this study, focusing on the implications of accruing different forms of capital: scholastic capital in the form of engaging in scholarship (Ding & Bruce, 2017; Swales, 1985), economic capital by focusing on income generation (Fulcher, 2009) or social capital by building social relationships (Field, 2008). Finally, the nature of symbolic violence strategies within higher education will be explored, and their impact on the position of EAP within the academy.

This qualitative study therefore aims to focus specifically on the causes, implications and potential solutions relating to the position of EAP within the academy by addressing a number of key research questions:

- What role does EAP play in marketized HE settings?
- How do EAP practitioners navigate this social space?
- What is the impact of the position of EAP in UK higher education?
- What strategies do EAP practitioners employ to improve their position in the field of higher education?

A qualitative methodological framework has been chosen in order to provide rich data on this complex social issue (Dörnyei, 2007), understand respondent perspectives (Harding, 2019)

and provide a ‘thick description’ (Holliday, 2015) of the situation. A multiple case study research design will be used, and will provide an opportunity to study several EAP units in detail in order to provide an in-depth, holistic and in-context understanding of positioning in organisational structures (Casanave, 2015; Punch, 2016; Yin, 2018).

A sample of three case study sites will be selected representing different organisational positions in higher education. Following a basic mapping exercise to record where EAP services fit within university structures, cases will be selected purposively. It is envisaged that they will be a private provider outside the university structure, an EAP unit based in a faculty within the university, and a unit in a service department, such as an international office. In addition, interviews will be sought with experts in EAP and higher education.

Data will be collected at each site in the form of documentary information and interviews. To facilitate data collection, a data collection protocol will be developed in order to provide an overview of the case study, data collection procedures and research questions (Yin, 2018).

Documentary evidence will include documents relating to the university’s international strategy, the EAP unit’s strategy and proposals, records of activity, and web pages relating to international students and language provision. In-depth interviews will be held with key stakeholders at each site, including EAP teachers, EAP managers, academic staff, international office representatives and senior managers responsible for EAP provision. Interviews will be semi-structured with open-ended questions, providing an opportunity to follow-up on areas of interest (Dörnyei, 2007), and will include questions on the positioning of EAP and respondents’ feelings.

Data from documentary evidence and interviews will be analysed using thematic analysis,

taking an inductive approach to identify emerging themes (Harding, 2019). This analysis will use data pooled from all sources and will examine commonalities, differences and relationships in relation to the research questions (Harding, 2019, p. 105). The themes will then be compared to, and located within, Bourdieu's theoretical framework.

A qualitative approach presents issues regarding generalisability of findings and potential researcher bias (Dörnyei, 2007; Hadley, 2017). These will be addressed by selecting diverse research sites and a range of interviewees which represent different experiences of positioning within higher education. Any preconceptions will be analysed early in the project, and documented to provide transparency.

It is hoped that this study will provide a deeper understanding of why EAP services are positioned as they are, how this impacts on quality and service delivery and how EAP can provide more benefit to the institutions where they are placed. This will enable EAP managers and decision makers to make more informed decisions about the location of academic literacy services, and will provide them with strategies for improving their position and impact.

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